**A Solid Foundation**  
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“What do all kids deserve? What do we want our kids to know when they leave school? What skills should they have? What would you want for your children or grandchildren?”

Mark Kuranz poses these thought-provoking questions to school counselors as he conducts training on the ASCA National Model®. The high school counselor from Racine, Wis., is preparing the group for the lengthy yet rewarding journey of designing and implementing a comprehensive school counseling program in their school or district. “Articulating beliefs is very powerful. It helps you stay the course at times when it’s easy to get derailed.”

Kuranz knows all too well that an inspiring vision is needed to stay the course. The former ASCA president chaired the committee responsible for developing the comprehensive school counseling framework released in 2003. “My focus was to keep the ball rolling. Now that I sit back and look at what we did, I’m amazed. At times I wondered whether we would pull it off,” Kuranz said.

These days Kuranz is busy helping other school districts pull off similar feats.

As a trainer, Kuranz leads school counselors through the process of identifying and expressing their beliefs and philosophy about students, the first step of laying the foundation for the ASCA National Model. During the foundation phase, counselors also articulate a mission statement and use the ASCA content standards to enhance their local curriculum for students.

As they discuss, debate and eventually reach agreement on a common set of beliefs and expectations, school counselors paint a vivid picture of what they want for their students. Armed with this compelling vision, school counselors continue and design the other pieces called for by the ASCA National Model: delivery, management and accountability systems.

School counselors turn to the ASCA National Model for any number of reasons. In Cheboygan, Wis., a new superintendent challenged all district staff members to examine how they could do their jobs more effectively. As a result, school counselor Steve Schneider and his colleagues used the ASCA National Model to structure their discussion and meet that challenge. In Tucson, Ariz., Angela Robinson led the process for her elementary school after encouragement from her boss, Judy Bowers, director of school counseling programs for the Tucson Unified School District and one of the lead authors of the ASCA National Model. Robinson said, “We just grabbed the bull by the horn and began.”

**How to Begin?**  
To launch the initial foundation stage, there needs to be a person who’s energized about the exciting possibilities of the ASCA National Model. This school counselor, sometimes called “the keeper of the vision,” acts as cheerleader, gatekeeper, liaison and occasional task master throughout the process. The facilitator must invite input, hear concerns, respond, continue the dialogue and help the group reach resolution. Robinson acknowledged her role as a keeper of the vision at her Tucson school. “I took the lead and knew where to go. I created enthusiasm for the ASCA National Model, which helped more than anything.” While the keeper of the vision is often one person, Kuranz said, “The more keepers of the vision, the bigger critical mass and more exciting things can happen.”

To avoid being overwhelmed, Kuranz recommends picking a specific place to start. He suggests doing the program audit at the outset to figure out which of the building’s or district’s current activities match up with the ASCA National Model. He said, “People realize they’re already doing a lot of what’s in the ASCA National Model; it’s just not organized that way.” The audit highlights the many positive aspects of the existing counseling program and helps diffuse any concern by the school counselors that they haven’t been doing their jobs “right” up to this point.

**Beliefs and philosophy:** After creating a baseline picture through the audit, it’s time for school counselors to get grounded in their beliefs. A brainstorming session helps counselors identify what they want their students to know and what they should be able to do. “It is critical that people spend time talking about what they believe. Not ‘Why am I a school counselor?,’ but ‘What are behaviors, skills and knowledge I believe all kids should have, and what do all kids deserve?’” Kuranz said.

School counselors grow excited when they tap into their core beliefs. This shared philosophy helps lift counselors over the inevitable roadblocks that pop up later as the discussion shifts to needed changes. Schneider reported that school counselors in Cheboygan really enjoyed this initial process. In groups, school counselors came up with separate lists of beliefs for elementary, middle and high school students. After compiling the lists, striking out duplications and filling in gaps, the school counselors produced a one-page belief statement to guide their future work.

**Mission statement:** Another critical piece of the foundation stage is the mission statement. The mission statement captures school counselors’ dynamic and full vision for students. Built upon the set of beliefs and philosophy, the mission statement helps counselors redesign and operationalize their counseling program.

Robinson recommends school counselors locate mission statements currently used by the building or district and incorporate elements of those statements into the school counseling mission statement. Linking the language enables the school counseling program to be consistent with and integrated into the broader system. In addition, school counselors can point to how the program supports the school and district’s overall vision, giving administrators another reason to support a comprehensive school counseling program.

The mission statement may take some time to develop. In Cheboygan, “We spent a lot of time discussing semantics that sometimes felt petty. But it’s important to get the statement right,” Schneider said. The right words encourage school counselors to rally around the mission statement and better internalize the vision and beliefs. Otherwise, the mission statement could end up hanging on a wall, a rhetorical statement that provides no real direction.

**ASCA content standards:** The stage of cross-walking the school’s (or district’s) curriculum with content standards is “where the rubber meets the road,” according to Schneider. All of the pieces from the foundation phase begin to fall into place as school counselors ask themselves which student competencies are critical for each grade level. Counselors examine how their curriculum and activities compare with the ASCA content standards in three key domains: academic, career and personal/social development. The curriculum also is matched up against learning objectives provided by the state department of education. The end result is a school counseling curriculum that promotes high achievement for every student and is congruent with the beliefs and vision articulated by that group of school counselors.

 “You’re not rocking the boat that much at the foundation level,” Schneider said, “But you begin to hit some waves at the step of cross-walking the standards. The beliefs and mission statement are rhetoric, albeit rhetoric from the heart. Those things alone don’t constitute change.” However, the cross-walk highlights gaps and areas that need changing. School counselors delve further into the change process as they undertake the ASCA National Model’s subsequent phases.

**A Flexible Foundation**Schools and districts of all different shapes and sizes have used the ASCA National Model as a springboard to strengthen their school counseling programs and maximize student achievement. Robinson, who currently works in an urban district, said, “I came from a rural school in Idaho where I was the only school counselor. I would have gone through the exact same process if I were still there.” Kuranz said, “That’s the beauty of this model. It’s a framework, not a cookie-cutter approach. Counselors can meld it to the needs of their students and district.”

While counselors go through similar processes as they move through the four quadrants – foundation, delivery, management and accountability – the eventual outcome looks different. That’s because the ASCA National Model is structured so the school counseling program ends up reflecting the particular beliefs, needs and expectations of that community. “The ASCA National Model is built around what works and what is important for your community,” Kuranz said. “Knowing the ASCA National Model has such flexibility takes away a lot of school counselor anxiety.”

All who’ve used the ASCA National Model agree that the process of developing a comprehensive school program is a journey. During the foundation phase, school counselors may feel like they’re going around in circles as they strive to create a clear and cohesive belief or mission statement. “Don’t fool yourself into believing that this can be done quickly,” Kuranz said. “This is not a discrete, quick-fix for school counselors.”

In Cheboygan, Schneider anticipates the journey will take three years, a time period that coincides with the superintendent’s directive to all employees to review their effectiveness. School counselors meet with their district peers and hold one-hour meetings twice a month to work through the ASCA National Model. After one year, the school counselors have completed the foundation quadrant. Their next steps are to move into delivery systems and management pieces.

Given the time and energy needed to design, implement and evaluate a comprehensive school counseling program, some school counselors may wonder – Is all this effort worth it?

Those who have gone through the process respond with a resounding yes.

Tucson’s Robinson describes three tangible benefits to adopting the ASCA National Model, including:

**Improved student outcomes:** With a well-designed program to guide them, school counselors help raise the bar for kids and boost academic scores. They also use data generated by evaluation and accountability mechanisms to demonstrate those advances. “In our first year, the school’s goal was to raise writing scores by 5 percent. Every counseling lesson had a writing component that was aligned with the grade level. We ended up raising scores by 15 percent,” Robinson said.

**Better relationships with principals and teachers:** “All of my lessons support academic goals and are 100 percent consistent with Arizona standards and national standards for reading, writing and math,” Robinson said. “Teachers love me coming into their classrooms. They understand how every lesson is going to help students have better attitudes, behaviors and academic achievement.” She also coordinates her counseling lessons with the principal’s plans for staff development.

**Enhanced role for school counselors:** The ASCA National Model helps provide a clear picture of the school counselor’s job and allows counselors to reach students in a systematic and purposeful way. Adopting the ASCA National Model “makes you the professional you were called to be,” Robinson said. “People listen because you’re walking your talk. It’s raised my counseling to new professional levels.”

Schneider describes the foundation quadrant as the “defining piece” of the ASCA National Model because it’s the only quadrant to focus solely on the students. Once school counselors complete this stage, they have their own north star to guide them as they tackle the more challenging topics of delivery, management and accountability systems. In addition, this guiding light reminds school counselors why they are engaged in such a lengthy process. All this work isn’t about the ASCA National Model. “It has to be about the kids and our vision for the kids,” Schneider said.

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